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An important problem in teaching Turkish as a second language: -mXş indirectivity marker

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Abstract

“-mXş” morpheme (suffix) has been used as the “learned past tense” as a past tense coder in traditional grammar works. However, the main function of this suffix is not to indicate time. In the course books that are published both in Turkey and abroad, this suffix is referred to as “narrative modal”, “heard past tense” or “past tense with –miş”. In these materials, one gets the assumption that the primary function of this suffix is to indicate past tense. As an international language category, indirectivity has been expressed in different syntactic structures or with different coders according to the typology of the language. As a subgroup of evidential modal, the indirectivity has been marked with “-mXş” morpheme together with other modal indications. In Turkish “-DX” is the past tense marker morpheme. However, in the books given to the Erasmus Intensive Language Program students who are studying in Turkey, -mXş is also given as a past tense marker which is leading to many mistakes. The main aim of this study is to identify the functions of this morpheme and propose suggestions to clarify the issues about its usage.

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1. Introduction

Chomsky's Universal Grammar (1981; 1986) proposes human beings have an innate language capacity, and grammatical rules are shared by all languages however the differences in these languages are due to their typology. Learning a foreign language is a long and complex process. Learning a second language after the mother tongue does not start from the scratch because the learner has already acquired different knowledge and skills about the use of the language and its structure. That's why it is natural to use this information while learning a foreign language (Demircan, 2002, p. 57). There is a group of students who are learning Turkish as a second language that came from different parts of Europe via Erasmus. In a class of 15 students, many countries of Europe such as Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Greece, Portugal and Belgium are represented. Some of these students' languages belong to Latin language family, some others German, Slavic and Ural families which would demonstrate that the typologies of their languages are not same. If the learners are studying a second language which belongs to their first language's family, the duration of the learning process becomes shorter; if the language families are different, the duration gets longer (Özmen, 2000, p. 288). Functional linguistics deals with the

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functions of language structures and the rules of their usage. The functions of the linguistic units rather than their forms are prioritized in the analyses of the language.

In this paper, I will focus on the time features of “-mXş” morpheme and its difficulties while teaching it to the foreigners.

2. Method

In this study, data analysis and observation techniques of qualitative research method have been utilized. The data analysis method depends on the analysis of the written material based on the research aim (Yıldırım-Şimşek, 2003, 140-141). Data analysis method is more commonly used by historians and linguists. Written and oral data can be used in these analyses. We used the written and oral input of our students together with my observations in the classes.

The main motivation of working on this topic was the difficulties I observed in the use of “-mXş” marker by the students who came to Turkey via ERASMUS and the visiting students of the Navy. The universe of this study is these two groups of students who were learning Turkish as a Second Language.

3. Findings

I will list the problems that I observed in my teaching experiences and talk about the possible reasons and solutions for these problems in this study. The problems stem from two reasons: first, “-mXş” is taught under the Time category and second the indirectivity marker is conjugated in Turkish as a time marker but in the native languages of our students, such a category does not exist.

Linguistic time categories are represented differently in different languages even though time reference is universal (Akşehirli, 2010, p. 21). The studies on the conjugation of Turkish verbs would reveal that markers such as -DI, -(I)mIş, -Iyor would include time, aspect and tense references (Taylan, 2005, p. 144). These multifunctional markers get their meaning in the contexts they are used.

In traditional grammar books, the past tense in Turkish is given in two categories: seen past tense and heard past tense. Seen past tense’s marker is “-DX” morpheme (-dı, -di, -du, -dü; -tı, ti, tu, tü). Because of this marker some grammar books name this tense as “past tense with -di marker” due to the marker used. This past tense does not cause any permanent major problems except its allomorphs.

The other tense that gives the past tense meaning is used with a transferring meaning where the speaker does not actually remember if the mentioned action is performed or not. This is also called unconscious past tense and it also has the learned meaning: “A! Kar yağmış!” (Look! It snowed!- It snowed but I did not know that); “Uyumuşum” (I fell into sleep unconsciously); “Tren kalkmış” (From the information I learned from other people the train has left) or it might be used for a specific time reference: “Hava güzelmiş.” The weather was good (It is good but I did not know that) (Deny, 2012, p. 357).

In some of its uses, -mXş morpheme would have past time reference but it does not reflect the sole function of it. We can even say that it has more important functions to carry out. This morpheme is used with three different functions in Turkey and they can be used all at once. 1- as an indefinite past tense marker as stated by many grammar books, 2- as a marker of heard past tense by adding it to an already conjugated verb, 3- in nominal sentences, by adding it to a noun and making it the predicate of the sentence. In all these three uses, more salient than the past reference, the indirectivity is emphasized.

Evidentiality is regarded as an independent grammar category in Universal Grammar like time, aspect and modality after many studies conducted after 1980s. Evidentiality of a morpheme can be based on three things: speculation, deduction and perception (Bacanlı, 2008, p.2). As a subcategory of evidentiality, indirectivity can be marked with -mXş morpheme in Turkish syntax. Main problems that are encountered while teaching this morpheme is as follows:

3. 1. Problems about the spelling of the suffix

These problems would stem from the use of the specific allomorph according to the vowel harmony. Because it is not our focus in this study, I am not going to discuss them in detail. In the workbook following misuses of the suffix are provided.[†]

“Yemeğini bitirmiştin. Güzel olMIŞ mi?” (olmuş mu?) (You finished your meal. Was it good?) (Uzun, 2009, p. 52).

“Bu fotoğraftaki sen misin? O zamanlar ne kadar farklıMIŞSİN” (farklıymışsın). (Is it you in this picture? You were very different then.)

“Saçların daha uzunMIŞ” (uzunmuş), “biraz da kiloluMIŞSİN” (kiloluymuşsun). (Your hair was longer and you were fatter. (Uzun, 2009, p.52).

3. 2. Problems stem from grammatical classification

Answering the question “Is –mXş morpheme a time reference suffix or indirectivity marker?” is vital to use this suffix while teaching the past tense. In the Turkish teaching book called Hitit published by TÖMER, this topic is introduced in A1-A2 level set in Unit 8 with the following title: “It is said that...” This intensive 22 hour lesson has three subunits. The main goals of these subunits are: (a) being able to talk about what they had seen or learned to other in past tense sentences and (b) using past tense markers properly. However, the examples given in the book always has an indirectivity marker meaning but only in some cases do they carry the past tense meaning.

In the sentence “Ali gitmiş.” (Ali went.), main goal is not to signal past tense but to signal that the information is gained indirectly from a third party. If we were to use “-DX” morpheme to give the same meaning, we could have said “I learned that Ali had gone” or “As far as I heard Ali had gone”. However, they do not sound natural for the native speakers of Turkish because the expressions “I learned that” and “As far as I heard” would contradict with the certainty meaning of –DX morpheme. However, for the students whose first languages are of European origin, this sounds quite natural, because there is not a distinction between indirectivity and certainty.

In the sentence “*Dün akşam Okan ve Eray sinemaya gitmişler. Film çok korkunçmuş.*” (Last night Okan and Eray went to the cinema. The movie was awful.) [Hitit (2012)120][‡] the past tense marker is not –muş but the time adverb “last night”. If these two sentences are separated and used individually, the meaning of the second sentence would change and get the meaning of “being awful has not finished yet and ,t still continues” which would not have a past time reference.

In the sentence, “*Ben küçükken yaramaz değilmişim.*” (*I was not a naughty boy when I was young*), if we remove “when I was young” the meaning of the sentence would go beyond the past tense. To the question of “When I was naughty?” the answer would not only be “before, when I was young” but also “never”. That’s why one cannot say that the mXş morpheme here has a time reference. The main function of this morpheme is indirectivity.

In the sentence, “*Duyduğuma göre kardeşin yeni bir iş arıyormuş*” (As far as I heard, your brother is looking for a new job), –muş has no time reference. “As far as I heard” expression with mXş morpheme implies indirectivity.

To the sentence, “*Aaa, çocuklar bahçedeymiş.*” (Look, the children are in the garden), when a question such as “When” is asked, the answer would not be “yesterday” or “before” but “now”. This sentence would not imply something learned from another person but talks about awareness and noticing.

In the sentence, “*Bugün onun yaş günü müymüş?*” (Was today his birthday?), the time reference used is not past but today which refers to present time. The main function of this suffix is that the information is gained indirectly.

4. Conclusion and discussion

The above mentioned examples emphasize the indirectivity mode of “-mXş” morpheme rather than its being a time reference. Accordingly, we should teach it in that way. Teaching heard past tense takes more time compared to teaching of other grammatical subjects. Main reason of this fact is the confusion about the function of this indirectivity marker and demonstrating it as a tense marker.

[†] Ungrammatical examples are written with capital letters; correct versions are given in paranthese.

[‡] All examples in this work have been taken from “Yeni Hitit, *Yabancılar İçin Türkçe Öğretmen Kitabı 1* (A1,A2)”.

Teachers who are teaching Turkish as a Second Language, if possible, should be aware about the differences between the native languages of their learners and Turkish and should pay attention to these differences. (Özmen, 2000, p. 288). Moreover, while preparing the teaching materials, the course book writers should pay attention to these differences.

Most of the problems about the learning of “-mXş” morpheme can be tackled if the teachers and course book writers prioritize the indirectivity function of this morpheme rather than introducing it as a past tense marker.

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